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(ca. 1870) NT8 Eastern Apache NT8
Chiricahua

825 775 The owl represents the spirit or ghost of a person who was bad during his life and continues to be vicious after death. He works by entering the body of an owl and exercises evil influence in this way. Those who were desperate in life, such people as murderers and those who were given to jokes of a rough nature, are the ones likely to assume such a form after death.

This is what I heard in my young days—I remember my father telling me of it. Our belief is that, when the Chiricahua who has been a bad one dies, he turns to an owl. We believe that the bad ones go right into the owl at death, at once. The others who were good through life go to the underworld.

Since the owl is the ghost of a malicious human being, its hoot is interpreted as a dire warning:

I'm not so much afraid to kill an owl or even to handle it; it's the call! When I was in sheep camp, I listened closely and it seemed to me that it was talking the Chiricahua language. Some say they hear it say, "I'm going to drink your blood!" My wife says it sounds that way to her. Some say it sounds like, "I'm one of your relatives." To me it sounds like, "I'm a Mescalero." Some believe that dead relatives are in the form of the owl. They don't want to hear it. It's not the owl itself which is the dead person, but the voice. The owl always fools around the place where a person has died.

825 775 753 These "words" of the owl can cause sickness through fright:

If you hear an owl, you know a ghost is near by, for the owl is connected with the ghost. The ghost uses him, goes into his body. Owls talk the Chiricahua language. They say different things to different people. To me it seems like they are saying, "All your people are going to get killed." The call of the owl is very powerful. It can get into your body and cause trouble.

Most people, feeling that direct reference to evil invites its appearance, are unwilling to speak of owl or ghost sickness. Therefore, because ghosts and owls are both particularly active at night, the malady which they bring is most often designated "darkness sickness."

825 775 753 781 761 An actual encounter with an owl is a harrowing experience:

The Chiricahua are afraid of the owl. It is because the owl stays around the place where people have died, and when it comes it is a sign that someone is going to die. Many people, when they hear the call of the owl, get frightened and faint. My wife went through an experience with the owl. About a hundred paces from her my wife saw a person in black. This person was walking toward her. When it got close, it changed to an owl and flew at her. When it flew up, it tried to sit on her head. She fought off the owl, and it flew away. I wasn't at home at the time. When I came home my wife was still trembling. I knew a ceremony toward the owl, and so I performed it and made her well again.

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When you are frightened by the owl, your heart begins to flutter; your heart gets weak and you fall down. I can pray for a person who has been frightened like this and, even though his heart is beating only a little, can restore him so that he gets up again.

Another story, so well known that it has been recorded from four different informants, concerns the return of a woman's ghost to her former home:

A man and his wife lived out at Whitetail. About two years ago the wife died, and the husband continued to live at the same location, though he didn't use the place in which she had died. One night he heard a knocking at the door. Then something was calling him by name. He went to the door but could see no one. This happened for three nights. He was very frightened. He kept his gun ready.

There was a full moon the fourth night. He had gone to bed. He thought he heard a rapping on the window. He looked and was pretty sure he saw his wife's face. He tried to talk to her. He said, "Come in at the door; if you have anything to say to me, let us see each other face to face." But no one came in.

After a while he heard the rapping again. This time he shot, and he heard groans. He was afraid to go out until morning. When he went out the next morning, he found a dead owl lying by the window. The next day he told the story. He knew he wouldn't live long after that, and he didn't last long. He could have gone to an owl shaman, but he didn't care much about going on living after that. 761

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It is evident that owl sickness is but one aspect of ghost sickness. But, though all owls are ghosts, the ghost need not take the form of an owl to frighten or harm the living. A whistling sound at night, when nothing at all is visible, is attributed to ghosts. This has given rise to a rule: "No whistling is permitted at night, for then the ghosts whistle back to you and scare you." There are ways of protecting one's self when the whistle of a ghost is heard:

When you get scared you get sick. If you go out on a dark night, you tie a small amount of ashes up and carry this. Put some ashes on your face too. When you hear a whistle at night, take some ashes and throw them in the direction of the whistle, and then the ghost gets frightened and doesn't scare you or bother you any more. Put ashes under your pillow too.

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The shade may call attention to its proximity by other audible means:

A young man was walking up a canyon with a girl in the moonlight. He heard a horse coming, trotting along. He thought it was somebody from the camps,

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781 and, because it was late and he didn't want to hurt the girl's reputation, he didn't want to be seen with her. So they went up on the side of a hill. He heard someone laughing and talking on the other side. He told the girl to stay where she was and went to the edge and looked down. Nothing was there. It was impossible to block a clear view on this road. No one could go back or forth without being seen. He didn't tell the girl about it, for he didn't want to scare her.

I know this man well, and he is pretty reliable. I said to him, "Maybe it was just a horse." He said, "No, I could have seen a horse from that mountain."

This boy married the girl he was with on this occasion. She died. She didn't live long after that—only four years. It's funny! Ghosts come around the Chiricahua all the time. That's why we believe in ghosts.

Occasionally, the ghost is neither seen nor heard but makes itself known in some other way:

Sometimes a ghost throws a stone at a person and makes fun of him. My cousin, my wife, and her sister were going up a canyon to a ranch. It was toward evening. They were being drawn by a pretty lively pair of mules. My cousin sat in front and my wife in the back of the wagon. As they were going around a cliff, they saw a stone come through the air. It was thrown under the mules. The way it came proved that it could not have rolled. Three neighbor boys lived around there, but they were away that day. The mules were frightened and nearly tipped the wagon over. It must have been a ghost that threw the stone. No one else could have done it.

There are times when the ghost is discernible as an amorphous black or white object:

One day, after I was married, I was riding my mule back from Whitetail. My young brother-in-law was with me, and we got lost in the woods and could not get out before dark. We got into a canyon neither of us knew. And up among the trees I saw something white. I didn't think anything of it, but in a few minutes I saw it again. Still I thought it was a wild white horse or a bare patch of earth. Right then my mule began to balk and rear. I couldn't do anything with her. I got off and called to my brother-in-law, but it was a long time before I could lead that mule out of the canyon. Finally, we got our directions and got home.

[753] I rode up to the camp and called to my wife to take the mule. I was so weak I could hardly get off. I couldn't even tell her what was the matter. She had to help me in, and I was just ready to die. My mother-in-law knew a great deal, and she said, "He is sick from darkness." . . . . I said to my young brother-in-law, "Did you see anything white when my mule shied?" But he hadn't seen anything at all. So he didn't get sick.

A footprint may be the only tangible evidence that a ghost has paid its unwelcome visit:

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This happened to S., and he was a good Christian then. He was asleep by a window. It was at the time of a big snow. That night someone knocked at the window. S. and his wife heard it. At first they paid no attention. Finally S. called and asked who was there. He received no answer. They went to sleep. In the morning they went to the window and saw a track there. S. started to follow it. The trail led to the mountain. He followed it for a while, but he got tired and came back. Tracks like that usually lead to graves.

The greatest misfortune of all is to see the ghost in human-like form and to recognize the actual features:

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I have heard stories of persons who have seen the dead. Those who see things like that die within a year. A certain man's wife died. At that time he was well. After her death he saw his wife; she came back and talked to him. She said, "It is a better world where I am. Come on." This man took sick and died a short time afterward. There is no way to protect yourself or prevent your death when a thing like this happens.

Most often it is in dreams that the dead are distinctly seen:

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Ghosts appear also in dreams, in sleep. That is the worst form, I guess. You really see them in a dream. I get like that. The door opens and they get closer and closer. I want to get up and fight, but I can't move. I can just say, "Ah!" The Chiricahua say this is ghost sickness. It can make a person very ill. It's a sign of trouble with evil ghosts if you do that too much, and you have to go to a shaman about it.

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Sometimes at midnight or toward morning while you are asleep, you dream that a person is choking you. It might be a dead person, a relative gone a year or two ago. If it happens for another night or two, you must go to a ghost shaman. If you see a dead person in your sleep, you are not going to last long, they say.

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A dream in which his recently deceased friend appeared before him was described by a much-shaken informant:

This morning about four o'clock I dreamed of Old P. standing at the door. I woke up frightened and grabbed my wife. Maybe he came back because I sang his ceremonial song. The very night that P. died I dreamed he came to me. I didn't tell my wife because she would have been frightened. But they don't bother me much. I have my cross,[12] and they stay away. P. claimed that he knew nothing but Yusn and Child of the Water.[13]

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[12] The cross of the Silas John cult, a modern religious movement which draws in part from aboriginal religious ideas, in part from Christianity. The cross, made of algerita wood, is worn to ward off evil and witchcraft.

[13] The informant here is trying to reassure himself. Since Yusn and Child of the Water are beneficent supernaturals, he is proving to himself that his departed friend can be up to no mischief.

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wise not to swell the number of the latter by radical departures from established custom.

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In keeping with the principle that ceremonialism should be confined to recognized values, undignified religious excitement is cause for humor rather than for praise.

This is sometimes called "religious excitement" or "religious ecstasy." It is the same as what is called "crazy ceremony." This is when a person goes through violent clapping of the hands involuntarily when in a religious ceremony. . . . . Some people get so excited in a ceremony that they shake all over or hit one hand on the other. I knew such a woman when I was young. Some go "Ah, ah, ah, ah!" –just gasp all the time. I knew one woman, part Chiricahua and part white, who acted like this when the masked dancers performed. The Chiricahua believe that you get this way when you take religion too seriously. Some Chiricahua think this is funny.

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The motives of the shaman may be questioned:

A woman shaman got all this poor woman's possessions. She was treating her for a long time. She kept asking for things. Finally she said that the sick woman would have to come to her camp to be cured. C. said when he heard about it that, if she went, she would never come back. And he was right.

Outright charges of fraud are not uncommon:

That man was never known as a shaman. He just picked up those songs from anywhere and changed them. Now he uses them for ceremonial songs. I was out at Whitetail with my wife. He was sleeping in the next room. His son-in-law was out there. (This was when his daughter was still alive.) I heard him making those songs up. He'd sing it in different ways. He'd sing, "My song makes everything well." Now he uses it for a ceremonial song. After practicing he'd come in where I was. I'd sing those words, and he'd just stare at me. He wanted to make a church song;[37] then he turned it into a ceremonial song. They say that he is crazy now and that his songs don't mean anything. No one knows where he got them or what right he has to them.

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Even when the patient recovers, the shaman may receive but grudging credit from his critics. Of one apparent cure, an informant said, "It is hard to tell why he got well. Maybe the man was ready to get well anyway, or maybe G. cured him."

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[37] Songs patterned after old Chiricahua types musically but expressing Christian sentiments have lately been composed for church use.